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The garden in winter

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I am here to give an afternoon seminar in the geography department of Queen's University, and this morning have taken the opportunity to see the exhibition *Art of the garden*, during its final week at the Ulster Museum. It is an exhibition I co-curated, proposing it to Tate Britain in 1999 in the light of an essay I contributed to *Tate* magazine's theme issue 'Dissecting Britishness'.[1] One of the briefs of Tate Britain, which remained in the former Tate Gallery at Millbank when Tate Modern opened in the converted former Bankside power station in 2000, was to explore issues of cultural identity in British art. It first did so by rehanging some of its British collection thematically, rather than historically, and to a hostile critical reception. So in proposing a thematic exhibition on the place of the garden in British art, which was itself organized thematically, and mixing works in a variety of different media – as well as, exceptionally, historical and contemporary works, some not completed until a short time before the opening – the exhibition proved a challenging undertaking. Work proceeded at an increasing rate, especially from 2002, with my co-organizers, Nottingham University art historian Nick Alfrey and Tate Britain's Senior Curator Martin Postle, and two in-house curators, Ben Tufnell and Mary Horlock. Like all Tate exhibitions, it involved a team drawn from various departments, including publishing, publicity, marketing, education and conservation, which increased in size and activity. *Art of the garden* first opened at Tate Britain one balmy evening in June 2004 – like some theatrical first nights a somewhat heady occasion for the cast after preparations of growing intensity.

This winter morning in Belfast, I am forcibly reminded how much of a changing *event* the exhibition is, staged very differently here at its second venue. The book-length catalogue is the same, prepared as a permanent record and display space in its own right,[2] but the show at Tate Britain was staged in a summer of garden-related cultural events, including art exhibitions (inside and out), horticultural shows and a tie-in (if independently produced) BBC television series also titled *Art of the garden* (which focused on design, not fine art), presented by garden makeover celebrity

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Diarmuid Gavin. The timing and perhaps even the very realization of the exhibition were influenced by the fact that 2004 was the bicentenary of the Royal Horticultural Society, which has a large, predominantly home counties membership and a pool of potential visitors. As with other theatrical productions, the reviews in the arts pages of the national media, appearing in the first week, became part of the event itself, highly positive ones soon appearing in exhibition publicity. While the exhibition, as most reviewers recognized, challenged fashionable garden mania, and narratives of garden history, this was the cultural, the horticultural, environment in which the exhibition was placed. The current artistic environment for an exhibition which focused on representations of small gardens, including those of artists themselves, was a domestic strain of recent British art, represented in another gallery at Tate Britain by Michael Landy's full-scale replica of his parent's semi-detached house in Essex. The opening was an arena for meeting people who had played a key role in the exhibition, including contemporary artists who are used to having much more of a say in how, and with what other art, their work is displayed. We had placed the work of one artist near the work of another about whom, when we a paid visit, he was dismissive. Discreetly, at a distance, I followed him into the room. More than usually, the opening was an opportunity for watching people rather than looking at the work. Entering this Belfast venue of the exhibition anonymously now, that summer evening seems long ago and far away. It is a sobering vantage point to reflect on exhibition making and meaning.

The decision for *Art of the garden* to travel beyond London was taken very late, almost as the catalogue went to press and unbeknown to the curators. After Belfast the exhibition will travel to Manchester, closing finally in May 2005. This is appropriate, given Tate's devolutionary initiatives (Tate St Ives and Tate Liverpool are now established as permanent galleries for its collection) and the current 'regional renaissance' policy of government arts funding. But while we were careful to select works for the exhibition on 'British art' which recognized sites and practices beyond south-east England (Scotland was a particular focus), there was little conscious connection with north-west England and none with Northern Ireland. Ulster Museum were apparently keen to have the exhibition because one of the contemporary artists, Anya Gallaccio, was a subject of school projects and they wanted to install her *Red on green*, a rectangular field of 10 000 cut red roses which mutates in colour as the flowers wilt and crumble.

As the original curators had no hand in installing the exhibition here or in its presentation, nor were invited to its opening, I am not sure what to expect. The poster displayed on the outside of the Ulster Museum is different from that promoting the exhibition at Tate Britain: not using Howard Sooley's photograph of Derek Jarman's garden at Dungeness but a detail of the figure from Arthur Hughs's *April love,* showing hardly any garden at all. The publicity leaflet at the museum entrance lists some family and school events, most of which are about gardens rather than art (including a session making garden bird seedcake). The shop has sold out of the catalogue. In terms of visitor numbers, I'd heard that the exhibition here had been a great success, over a 100 000 visitors (more than Tate Britain), although I now realize that as the show is free, and no one is counting; this may include all visitors to the museum, including the parties of schoolchildren swarming around the dinosaurs on the ground floor. I walk

through the museum to the gallery, up three flights of stairs, through various strata of Ulster history, with views out to a bleak-looking Botanic Garden. How many museum visitors venture up here? There is a sudden rush of people, but it turns out they are heading to the top floor, to a lecture by Irish landscape painter Martin Gale, whose large exhibition is displayed in the galleries there. Gale's pictures of Kildare fields, Antrim glens and Mayo bogs invaded by the New Ireland of bypasses, bungalows, tennis courts, new lawns and exotic shrubs resonate with some of the works of *Art of the garden*, although I wonder if this is apparent to others.

Compared to Gale's exhibition, spaciously hung and running the length of the top galleries, *Art of the garden* appears cramped, compressed into a space much smaller than that at Tate Britain, and with some low partition walls. There are obvious constraints here, not least budgetary ones. In the new Linbury Galleries, opened as part of Tate Britain to accommodate medium-sized, exploratory exhibitions, we planned a spare installation, not only to give room to works which we felt had the wallpower (such as David Inshaw's *The Badminton game*, a very seventies erotic reverie, complete with tumescent topiary, which had long been consigned to the Tate's basement, despite being among the most popular pictures in reproduction) but to arrange works of contrasting periods and media (Figure 1). I am aware of the creative, if

FIGURE 1 Installation day for *Art of the garden*, Linbury Galleries, Tate Britain, 25 May 2001. The space in the centre awaits the 10 000 red roses for Anya Gallaccio's *Red on green* (1992). The works on the walls are Adrian Berg's *Gloucester gate, Regent's Park* (1982) and Patrick Heron's *Azalea garden, May 1956* (1956).

discrete, role of the designers at Tate Britain, in some telling details, such as their insetting of the caption lettering into the walls, like inscriptions: here, card plaques are mounted on. Some of the arrangements of works in Belfast are different, suggesting different stories, although some placements seem a response to the available space rather than the overall themes of the exhibition. This is part of the art of exhibition-making anywhere.

While we had drafted a hang on a scaled plan of the Linbury Galleries, the placing of works was revised in the process of installation, sometimes at the moment the hooks were about to be hammered in, the plinths screwed down–often for formal design reasons, but revealing arguments and associations we had not anticipated. There is a contrast with the display space of the catalogue, in which (as with any publication) reproduction of the works can be manipulated to fit the space of the page and accompanying text, and where works of contrasting size and medium exist as visually equivalent photographic images. We had made every effort to see every individual work beforehand (and with less than a fifth coming from the Tate's own collection this required a good deal of travel), but seeing them together in the same space as they arrived and were unpacked created new situations. Some improvisation was required. One sculptural work using old garden tools arrived incomplete; for its display at the opening, one of the Tate staff went home to get a part from his shed. One work we didn't get to see is George Shaw's *English autumn afternoon*, from a private collection in New York; we requested it late, after seeing a companion work at Shaw's 2004 exhibition in Birmingham. It turned out to be half the size we were told; in its packing it looked much smaller than the work we had positioned next to it, and dwarfed by the hanging space. But it worked on the wall. The intense luminosity of Shaw's painting not only filled the space around it but transmitted across the room, resonating with the opening pictures of the exhibition, John Constable's jewel-like, panoramic paintings of flower and kitchen gardens in Suffolk. In a section titled 'Thresholds and prospects', a prospect was set up in the gallery space too. In this alignment of two window views of the parents' gardens of the respective artists–one from a farmhouse in Suffolk in 1815, one from a council house on the outskirts of Coventry in 2003–these pictures connected across two centuries of art and culture.

I knew that some key works would not travel to other venues, which is not unusual, but I am particularly apprehensive that the Constable paintings which opened the exhibition at Tate Britain–works which inspired my original proposal, and from which I saw the exhibition unfold–will not be in Belfast. In place of these flourishing late summer landscapes at Tate Britain, the first work the visitor sees in the Ulster Museum is Harry Bush's painting of a south London suburban garden with a bomb crater, painted the morning after an air raid in 1940. Nearby is a painting from the Museum's own collection not in the original show, a Paul Nash view of his garden under snow. The strain of the exhibition–which we hadn't exactly planned, but which emerged across its stated themes when it was installed, the garden as a site of mourning and loss, of disorder and destruction–has come back to haunt us, in more ways than one. In laying out the exhibition we resisted the temptation to make it garden-like; but seeing the display here, with that of the Tate so clearly impressed in my mind, is like going to

see a former, fondly arranged garden, expressing a personal history, altered by the new owners, losing the plot as it were. You might think about it as a salutary example of texts escaping authors, and as soon as the script of the proposal was agreed, and as a condition of the exhibition, my own authorial control was always subject to and in a sense subsumed by the Tate as an institution. If the catalogue is a testament of the work of curators, at the venue their names are scarcely acknowledged. As with any powerful institutional affiliation and its imprimatur, there are obvious advantages, but particularly in this case for an academic geographer studying the world of art. Those from whom we wished to secure information and works, particularly private lenders and contemporary artists (for whom the exhibition is good publicity), proved very willing – enthusiastically so – more so than others in the art world I have subsequently approached for information and permission to reproduce works in academic books and journals on which my name will appear more prominently.

I have sufficient reflections to inform the practical section of my seminar this afternoon on exhibitions in geography. What will be made of *Art of the garden* when it moves to Manchester in the spring?

Notes

[1] S. Daniels, 'Britain in bloom', *Tate* **20** (Spring 2000), pp. 32–3.
[2] N. Alfrey, S. Daniels and M. Postle, eds, *Art of the garden* (London, Tate, 2004).